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ABSTRACT

During the second year of a 3-year study involving 112 Iowa farm families, mothers of children aged 4 to 10 years old expressed expectations of independence, responsibility, and hard work from their children during home interviews. The importance of the parent-child relationship together with the lack of sufficient child-rearing research on rural populations form the justifications for this study. This study pictured the modern midwestern farm family as one in which an extended family is the rule, thus providing the potential for togetherness. Yet responding mothers indicated the family has chosen a lifestyle that allows for space, privacy, and the nurturance of responsibility and independent behaviors. Farm mothers repeatedly emphasized the desire for their children to become responsible, independent, and hard-working citizens as well as to be caring, helping, and considerate people. The majority of participating families were experienced with extension programs. However, when asked about the kinds of assistance extension agents and other professionals might provide in child-rearing, only a few indicated a desire for information about infants and adolescents. The overwhelming response was a firm statement that child rearing information from sources outside the family was neither needed nor wanted. Thus to change attitudes or impact on the farm family, patience with and long-term support of child-rearing extension programs will need to be exercised by extension personnel. (NEC)

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Child Rearing on the Farm[a]

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Farm families traditionally have been associated with rearing independent and hard-working people. But to what degree do modern-day farm mothers expect independence, responsibility and hard work from their children? This question and others were addressed in a study conducted in the Department of Child Development at Iowa State University. Since farm families are among the population served by Extension the findings of the study will have application to those planning Extension programs.

Justification for the Study

Well documented is the potential for impact by early environment on children's developing mental and social competencies.[1] Particularly salient to adequate development of children's mental competency, for instance, is a parent-child relationship which permits children to engage in meaningful explorations of their environment within clearly provided parental limits.[2,3] Furthermore, parents appear to assist the development of their children's social competency when they model behaviors for their children which are congruent with the guidance they verbalize with their children.[4] It is apparent, then, that one factor of major importance to the development of children's mental and social competencies is parenting style. This factor is of interest to parent educators. However, while parent educators are advised to assess their prospective audiences to determine on which parenting styles and needs focus educational programming,[5] such assessment is somewhat lacking for parents in general and particularly it is lacking for parents of rural America.

[a]Journal Paper No. J-10125 of the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, Ames, Iowa. Project No. 2019, a contributing project to the North Central Regional Research Project NC-124.

Therefore, the importance of the parent-child relationship together with the lack of sufficient child-rearing research on rural populations form the justifications for this study.

The Study

Farm families were defined for the study as (1) having at least one child between 4 and 10 years of age; (2) having both parents present in the home; (3) residing at least 5 years on a farm of 10 acres or more from which income was obtained; and (4) living outside incorporated towns and 30 miles or more from metropolitan areas. Families who participated in the study were all those who met criteria, who were willing, and who lived within randomly drawn geographical segments of the state of Iowa. The sampling technique yielded 112 Iowa farm families. Since the families represent a random sample, they can be considered typical of child-rearing farm families of Iowa and the midwest.

Data for this report are based on a home interview with the farm mothers during the second year of a 3-year study involving the participating families.[b] The home interview consisted of open-ended questions and Likert-scale-rated items by which the mother described her family, expressed her likes and dislikes about rearing children on a farm, and shared her hopes for her children.

Description of the Farm Family

What is the child-rearing midwestern farm family like? For the most part it is a second-, third-, or even fourth-generation farm family. Virtually all of the mothers and fathers in the study had grown up on a farm themselves and 90% of them had done so within the state. The families typically were a part of an extended family network. A majority

[b] Families and interviewers all were a part of the NC-124 Regional Research Project entitled, "A Life Span Analysis of Rural Children's Mental and Social Development."

of the families (75%) lived within 10 miles of the father's own parents. A goodly number (40%) lived within 10 miles of the mother's own parents. Almost none of the families were further than 50 miles from one set of their own parents and, in fact, many of the families were on a farm adjacent to that of either father's or mother's parents.

Since the families in the study were rearing at least one child who was between 4 and 10 years of age mothers and fathers were relatively young. Mothers typically were between 31-35 years of age, fathers were between 36-40 years. Mothers, on the average, had almost 1 year of education (college or trade school) beyond high school graduation and fathers in the study had slightly less formal education. Family size averaged 3.8 children, considerably more than the non-farm national average but considerable less than the average 5-child-family in which the parents themselves grew up.

Few of the fathers (16%) worked off the farm to supplement the income. More of the mothers (25%) had full or part time jobs off the farm with a relatively small number (10%) engaged in the teaching and nursing professions. Basically, the child-rearing farm family is one of both mother and father working together full time on the farm with their children observing and participating in the work.

The typical size of the farm operation was 320 acres. About half of the families owned most of the land they farmed or it was owned jointly with their parents. The rest of the families usually owned a small piece of what they farmed and rented the rest. Average income reported for the 1976 fiscal year, after taxes and expenses were deducted,

was $10,000 to $15,000, an amount viewed by the mothers as too little return for the investment. Although these reported incomes now are dated, little change has occurred since data collection in the income of farming relative to the income in other occupations.

Mother's Liking for Farm Life

Mothers expressed great satisfaction with living in a rural area. Responses of the mothers on a 1 to 7 scales, with 7 denoting "very satisfied," averaged more than 6 for satisfaction with living on a farm, with living in Iowa and with living in their particular section of the state. Less satisfaction was expressed for the working hours demanded by farming. Least satisfaction was for yearly income.

First-given responses by mothers to the question, "What do you like most about rural life?" were categorized as follows: privacy, 40%, independence, 20%; space, 16%; benefits to children, 14%; and togetherness, 10%. Clearly these farm mothers value their privacy and independence even though their least-liked aspects of rural life (driving distances, bad roads, and isolation) are natural consequences of what they like most. First-given responses by mothers to the question, "What do you like most about rearing children on a farm?" were categorized as follows: good environment for children, 48%; opportunity to provide close supervision, 28%; and opportunity to teach responsibility, 24%.

Mother's Hopes for Their Children

Mothers were asked, "What values do you most want to instill in your child?" Their first-given responses were: honesty, 37% consideration of others, 28%; responsibility, 19%; and independence, 17%. These values closely paralleled what mothers said they liked most about their children's behavior, namely: gets along well with others, 47%; is

responsible, 22%; is well-mannered, 18%; is independent, 8%; and is intellectual, 4%. Mothers' least-liked behaviors of their children describe one who has trouble getting along with others and one who acts neither independently nor responsibly. Mothers' values for their children also are reflected in the oft-repeated advantage they say they have over their urban counterparts. That advantage is the opportunity to teach and supervise their children in the meaning and worth of being both neighborly and responsibly independent. As the mothers see it, farm children have better circumstances than city children for learning togetherness and responsibility because they have chores to do, animals to raise, machinery to care for and family members to assist, all within the meaningfulness of a family enterprise.

In spite of their expressed liking for farm life, the mothers did not wish as first choice a farming career for their children. Rather, they hoped their children would pursue a career among the professions. Whatever the reasons for this aspiration, the mothers' first choice seemed almost her ideal hope rather than the real one. The second most frequently chosen career was farming, a choice voiced as much for girls as for boys. So, although mothers expressed hope that their children will choose a career from among the professions, mothers appear to be hoping as well, that their children will use the learned skills of farming as a back-up occupation should the first option not be possible.

Implications

The modern midwestern farm family is pictured in this study as one in which an extended family is the rule rather than the exception, thus providing the potential for togetherness. Yet the family has chosen a life-style that allows for space, privacy, and the nurturance of responsible and independent behaviors. Perhaps, in their attempts to have the

best of both worlds, togetherness and independence, these families have come to rely heavily on the marriage of both. Farm mothers repeatedly emphasize the desire for their children to become responsible, independent, and hard-working citizens. Yet in their responses the mothers also express a pervasive and deeply human aspiration for their children to be caring, helping and considerate people.

Farm families seem to respond to crises more from resources within the family network than the resources outside of it. We asked the participating mothers to suggest for us the kinds of help that we and other professional might provide for them in the rearing of the children. A few indicated a desire for information about infants and a few more for information about adolescents but the overwhelming response was a firm statement that child-rearing information from sources outside the family was neither needed or wanted. Such a message has implications for Extension staff and parent educators.

The majority of families in the study were experienced with Extension programs. Fathers, for instance, usually had attended Extension-sponsored meetings, particularly if the information so obtained was viewed by them as helpful to better farming. Families with older children typically were involved with 4H programs. Certainly with these types of previous participations we can conclude that Extension efforts were not new to most of the families in the study. Therefore, we admit to some curiosity about the parents' apparent reluctance to see Extension as an active resource for child rearing concerns.

Participating parents' previous Extension experiences were with programs on farming operations which, for the most part, are focused, defined and deserving of the farm family's familiarity with and confidence in them. But farm families do not appear to be as familiar with

nor as confident in Extension's more recent efforts to disseminate child rearing information. Since the science of child rearing is only a few decades old, even though the practice is not, it, like other young sciences, includes contradictory statements, incomplete theories and tentative findings. So farm families nourished on defined and fairly factual farming operations information may be underwhelmed by the softer child rearing literature. Participating families also appear to be less willing to discuss their child rearing concerns outside the family than they are to discuss raising livestock and growing crops. Perhaps the high value these parents place on personal independence casts the searching for child rearing answers outside the family in the category of family weakness.

Implications for Extension personnel seem clear. Top quality dissemination of current child rearing information is needed on a consistently continued basis to impact on the farm family. We can appreciate the slowness that is typical of attitudinal change. Therefore, patience with and long-term support of child-rearing Extension programs will need to be exercised by Extension personnel.

Summary

The farm families participating in this study, as farm families seem to have been in the past, are engaged in the business of instilling in their children the behaviors of independence, responsibility, hard work, and concern for others. Such characteristics are requisites for persons who would succeed in the farming enterprise. Farm parents also are protective of their privacy, independence, and child-rearing practices. Since in the final analysis it will be children so reared who offer the greatest potential for perpetuating the family farm, these parents are

the nation's staunchest advocates for the survival of a way of life that traditionally has demanded independent and hard-working individuals. The role of Extension personnel is to consistently provide solid information aimed directly at known child-rearing demands experienced by farm families.

Footnotes

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